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ABSTRACT

English as a Second Language (ESL) has influenced basic writing (BW) in a number of ways over the years, and this paper notes that there is a growing awareness of the similarities between the learning situations of ESL students and basic writers. The paper proposes that Language-for-Special-Purposes (LSP), an international movement derived from sociolinguistic principles, serve as a theoretical framework for BW. The paper explores three main LSP principles, applying each to BW theory and pedagogy; (1) needs assessment; (2) context research; and (3) authentic course material. The paper then argues that basic writers need to be taught the rules and rituals of college life and that the writing classroom should become a proving ground for academic writing tasks rather than a place where students do grammar exercises isolated from context and write paragraphs on artificial topics. Three notes and 61 sources are attached. (RAE)

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Language-for-Special-Purposes Theory and Basic Writing

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Abstract

Language-for-Special-Purposes Theory and Basic Writing

ESL has influenced basic writing (BW) in a number of ways over the years, and there is a growing awareness of the similarities between the learning situations of ESL students and basic writers. This paper proposes that Language-for-Special-Purposes (LSP, an international movement drived from sociolinguistic principles, serve as a theoretical framework for BW. The paper explores three main LSP principles, applying each to BW theory and pedagogy: (1) Needs assessments. LSP course and textbook designers survey the global needs of their students and establish a "target discourse universe"; this target may be narrow or broad, though the most common for students learning English are English-for-science-or-technology, and English-for-academic-purposes. BW courses and textbooks usually have no clear target; however, the most logical target to adapt would be writing-for-academic-purposes. (2) Context research. LSP course and textbook designers want a thorough understanding of the language of the target, and they work toward that end through context research. BW courses and textbooks with an academic target could be informed by a body of scholarship too, in this case studies of academic text, of expectations of academic readers, and of typical writing tasks in college courses. (3) Authentic course material. To bridge the gap between classroom and real situation, LSP teachers attempt to replicate the language of the target as closely as possible in simulated classroom activities. BW course materials can be a great deal more authentic in areas of writing assignments, readings, and exercises.

Language-for-Special-Purposes Theory and Basic Writing

Introduction

For may years, ESL has been a very productive influence on basic writing theory and pedagogy in areas such as error analysis and controlled composition. Recently, Hornung has also shown how psycholinguistic principles of second language acquisition apply to basic writers' acquisition of written language. In general, there is a growing awareness that second language learners and basic writers are similar in their linguistic situation as well as in age and practical needs. In short, ESL and basic writing have much to share. However, one ESL area that could serve as a major theoretical and pedagogical influence has gone unnoticed. Language-for-Special-Purposes (LSP)[1] is an international ESL movement involving thousands of adults who need to learn language for occupational or educational survival. Worldwide--and especially in Great Britain--courses have been designed to meet these students' special needs.

I propose in this paper to translate three main principles of LSP to basic writing. Doing so gives basic writing a much needed grounding in the social facts of language. Moreover, it gives basic writing a consistent theoretical framework, which most courses and textbooks currently don't have, as recent work by Connors (10) and Trimmer (7) demonstrates. In contrast, as Strevens indicates, LSP "has remained very closely in touch with intellectual developments. . . . It is rare in language

teaching to find so little distance and dilution between academic study and classroom practice" (English for Special Purposes (468).

Major Theoretical Principles of LSP

Needs assessments.

LSP is a reaction "against conventional foreign language instruction in which the unspoken assumption is . . . that the target for achievement is 'the whole of' the foreign language" (Strevens, "Special Purpose Language Learning" 45). In other words, in light of students' practical needs, their age, and pressure of time, and the way language acquisition occurs, LSP courses attempt to teach students fundamental language skills only for particular contexts.[2] This is accomplished first by assessing the students' primary need for learning the language. Normally, this need, which serves as a basis for textbooks and courses, is conceived of as some target discourse universe. For instance, courses such as Hungarian-for-Egyptian-locomotive-engineers or Russian-for-Syrian-bulldozer-drivers are built on very restricted universes. For learners of English, the most popular LSP courses are developed on somewhat broader universes: English-for-academic-purposes or (more specific versions of it) English-for-scientific- or technical-purposes.

Context research.

Once a target universe has been established, LSP course and textbook designers must "describe the language characteristics of that which the learners are required to handle" (Mackay and Mountford 8). In other words, to understand better what they are teaching, they want to be familiar with typical communicative situations,

common genres, normal writer/reader relationships, and formal textual characteristics in the target universe. To get such information, designers can rely to a degree on a growing body of LSP research in target universes.

Two especially popular strains of such research, according to Robinson (16-26), are register and discourse studies. Register studies, exemplified in work by Barber, describe typical lexical and grammatical features of writing in a target universe. More recently, though, discourse studies have become the means by which LSP research attempts to understand targets. Some such research focuses on rhetorical functions of writing in certain targets; Blanton, for instance, examines the major rhetorical functions of scientific research articles. Especially popular among discourse studies are what Widdowson calls "textualization studies" (4), a form of research developed by American LSP theorists (Lackstrom, et al.,; Selinker, et al.). Textualization studies focus on how forms customarily serve certain rhetorical functions --that is, they focus on the relationship between form and function. For instance, a number of textualization studies have investigated how elements of the verbal string may vary in scientific articles depending on whether they serve an introduction, a description-of-methodology, or a discussion-of-findings function (Hanania and Akhtar; Heslot; Oster; Trimble and Trimble). Similar studies involve relationships between functions and other forms--for instance, grammatical forms (Swales; West); the given/new structure (Weissberg), and paragraph topic sentences (Popken, "A Study . . . Scientific writing").

Authentic course contents.

An especially important point is LSP theory is that course contents should be authentic; in other words, course designers aim to "replicate the target type discourse" as accurately as possible in their classroom materials (Robinson 40). Though there is some disagreement over how best to achieve this aim, the general principles are that LSP students must use texts which have forms, topics, and communicative situations similar to those in the target and that they must learn how to use them (often through role-playing exercises) in context. This, in turn, will "insure the maximum transferability of the skills" taught in class to actual practice outside of class (Horowitz 468).

LSP Principles Translated to Basic Writing

Needs assessments in basic writing.

In applying LSP principles to basic writing courses and textbooks, the first thing to consider is students' global needs. It is fairly common, of course, for a needs assessment to be part of the planning stages of a basic writing course or textbook. However, too often such assessments don't involve detailed context considerations, despite evidence linking context to written performance (e.g., Odell and Goswami; Rushton and Young). In fact, the matter of basic writers' needs is often oversimplified, reduced to "learning good writing," "avoiding grammar errors," or some other useless abstraction. As a result, basic writing courses and textbooks usually do not focus on any discourse universe, but instead they aim for the whole of good writing.[3] This lack of a

contextual focus is evident in descriptions of how to set up basic writing courses by Crosby, Dixon, and Long ("Originating . . ."), who say nothing about the discourse universes they have designed. Basic writing textbooks are normally without contextual focus too; for instance, in their preface, textwriters Campbell and Meier only can offer the student "basic writing skills" so he/she can become a "good writer" (xi).

When there is no contextual focus, a basic writing course often becomes a hodgepodge of creative, journalistic, autobiographical, oratorical, and personal-reflective writing. Besides failing to teach what is most crucial to basic writers' needs, this approach confuses them. By contrast, a target gives students (and instructors) a clear aim. The most reasonable basic writing target for many technical college programs would be writing-for-occupational-purposes; in most other colleges and universities, however, the best target would be writing-for-academic-purposes. Such a course would not teach students writing specific to any one discipline but instead would be more generic, involving a "general academic language whose structure, general lexis, cohesive devices, and so on are . . . common to all special subject areas" (Price 27). Actually, Shaughnessy (Errors . . .) already argued for this target ten years ago when she pointed to academic discourse as the center of basic writing courses. Unfortunately, although Bartholomae, Bizzell ("Separation . . . "), Lunsford, and Rose since then have all expressed the same point, it has made little impact on basic writing pedagogy.

Context research and basic writing

Shaughnessy suggested that composition research should work toward a taxonomy of academic discourse ("Some Needed . . . 102). While by no means does a taxonomy exist yet, several studies of writing in the academic discourse universe can provide some very useful information for designers of basic writing courses and textbooks. Some of these studies have concentrated on texts. For instance, MacDonald showed how the advice to "use specifics" does not mean the same thing in academic writing as it does in popular journalism, such as is often used for writing class models. Bizzell ("The Ethos . . . ") argued that the ethos of non-academic oral language such as basic writers are most familiar with is much different from the ethos needed in academic situations. Petersen showed that academic writing tasks force writers to use a wide range of what he called "conceptual patterns": drawing analogies, speculating, persuading, and recording. Popken ("A Study . . . Academic Writing") found that the semantic nature of writing tasks in academic settings makes paragraph topic sentences virtually essential. Broadhead et al. outlined the broad range of syntactic patterns common in academic writing, patterns which could serve as a guideline for syntax instruction in basic writing.

Other studies have examined the college professor-audience--the very real reader that basic writers will be addressing--and its attitude toward error. Klinger and Long ("Error recognition. . . ") both found professor-readers reacting negatively to grammar errors such as sentence fragments and fused sentences. However, Long also found that these readers didn't consider some types (e.g.,

certain kinds of fragments) to be errors and that they regarded some usage issues as insignificant. Behrens ("Writing . . . ") found academic readers rating organization, analytical skills, and idea development--areas not even addressed in many basic writing courses--as higher instructional priorities than grammar and usage.

Several other studies have examined the writing tasks that college students--including basic writers--are likely to face in their academic careers. Such research has much potential for basic writing in that it often calls into question typical writing tasks. For example, the essay exam, seldom a main component of basic writing courses or textbooks, has been found by Bridgeman and Carlson; Eblen; Harris and Hult; and Wallace to be a primary --in some cases the primary--academic genre. By contrast, the personal experience essay, often a staple in basic writing, was not found to be a major genre in academia (Horowitz), nor was the expository essay (Bridgeman and Carlson), so often the target genre for basic writing courses and textbooks.

Authentic course contents and basic writing.

Designing basic writing courses and textbooks that are consistent with writing in the academic discourse universe involves changes in existing writing and reading assignments and exercises.

Unfortunately, Trimmer found that only 40% of the basic writing courses in his survey had a writing component at all and that only 10% had more than paragraph length writing assignments (15). Obviously, the primary component of a course designed to help students

survive the academic experience is that there be writing, and preferably writing of more than an occasional paragraph.

There are also other ways that assignments in basic courses could be made to resemble real academic writing tasks. A fairly typical basic writing assignment is given in sample 1, taken from a textbook by Wiener and Palmer (18):

> 1. Here is a listing of possible titles for a cause and effect paragraph. You may select one of these or make up your own title.
>
> About Your Life:
>
> 1. How My Life Changed After_____
> 2. If I Had a Million Dollars
> 3. After I Passed the Exam

Both the topics and the global aims in 1. are highly artificial. How likely is it in a college course that a student would be called on to write a cause-and-effect piece about a wish or a personal life-passage? This assignment is more suited to a journal, not to a paper assignment. Sample 2., from McKay's LSP textbook, is more authentic (149):

> 2. You are a student in an American Studies Class. Your class has just finished reading Edward T. Hall's The Silent Language. One of your assignments is to write a short paper in which you express your opinion regarding Hall's discussion of Americans' concern with promptness.
>
> First, reread the excerpt from The Silent Language. Begin your essay by summarizing, in your own words, Hall's view of time as a form of communication and his belief about Americans' concern with promptness. After you have summarized Hall's position, indicate whether or not you agree with his opinion and list your reasons for either accepting or rejecting his views. Finally, give at least two specific examples to support your position. Describe at least two incidents from your own experience which show how Americans view promptness. Be sure to use the expressions of opinion and reason discussed in the chapter. Introduce your example with phrases such as, for example, for instance, or to give an example.

It asks students to summarize and to defend a position, both global aims that Bridgeman and Carlson found to be typical of academic assignments (264). Furthermore, it asks students to write in

response to a text, which is an almost universal feature in academic writing (four of the seven most typical writing tasks in Horowitz's survey involved writing about texts). In general, much can be done to replicate academic assignments in basic writing courses: Using academic topics, assignments could require students to summarize, paraphrase, describe procedures, defend positions, criticize, and even analyze. Assignments might replicate academic tasks in logistical ways, too, for instance by requiring students to work with materials from a lecture or a printed text.

Basic courses could also be more authentic if greater attention were given to the essay exam since, as noted earlier, it plays such an important role in academic settings. In fact, though it shares some characteristics with other academic writing, the exam essay is a separate context: after all, writers are forced to respond to narrow question prompts, which they normally don't do in other writing, and of course they also must truncate their composing process rahter severely. Unfortunately, basic writing textbooks don't deal with essay exams in the manner that LSP textbooks (e.g., Arnaudet and Barrett; Adams and Dwyer) often do.

Besides writing assignments, reading materials also could be made more authentic in basic courses. With the present emphasis on the impact of reading "input" on student written "output," more and more basic writing textbooks contain reading components. However, these readings often miss the target universe badly. What Behrens ("Meditations") argued regarding rhetorical readers for freshman composition applies to basic writing as well:

articles from Atlantic Monthly or personal meditations by literary figures are not what basic writers need to read if they are to internalize academic discourse. Instead, models should consist of good student writing, writing from textbooks such as the ones they are reading in other classes, and perhaps even excerpts from easily-read academic journals.

Finally, in making basic writing courses more authentic, something also could be done about exercises. For one thing, like writing assignments, exercises should involve academic topics. Unfortunately, this is often not the case, as is illustrated in 3., an excerpt from a comprehensive editing exercise from Glazier's book:

3. 1. Its useless to wait hes probably not coming.
   2. If one wants a larger vocabulary you should study word roots.
   3. Spending entirely too much time on that one coarse last semester.
   4. Dad ask my sister and me to water the lawn we was glad to do it.

Because it has authentic material, sample 4., taken from Adams and Dwyer's LSP textbook (182), is a better editing exercise:

4. Although India is a large country with many nature resources, but it has many social and economic problems. One of its most serious problem is housing. Poor people has to live in terrible houses or in the street. Also education is a problem which it is difficult to solve. Shortage of teachers, schools, and books, that make the competition for educational opportunities very severe. The third major problem lack of health facilities.

Basic writing exercises would also be more authentic if LSP textualization principles were applied. Unfortunately, too

often basic writing exercises only involve students in mindless repetition of forms, as illustrated in a nonrestrictive clause exercise from Eisenberg and Wiener's book (98):

> 5. Combine the following sentences by using who, which, that, or whose correctly. Eliminate words if necssary.
>
> 1. Did you see the doctor? She can prescribe medicine for you.
>
> _____
>
> 2. I saw the movie. It featured Marlon Brando.
>
> _____
>
> 3. Laurie wants a motorcycle. It will go fast.
>
> _____

To the basic writer, there is no clear reason to use the relative in 5., other than that the teacher says to. But exercises can make basic writers sensitive to why (and when) to use syntactic patterns--in other words, to their rhetorical function. In academic writing, one function of nonrestrictive relatives is to allow less important--though still somewhat significant--information to be included without breaking up the thematic direction of the text. This underlying grammatical-rhetorical relationship is incorporated into 6., a revision exercise I use in my classes:

> 6. Directions: Assume that the following paragraph is part of a rough draft for a political science paper. Go over it and look for sentences which are important enough to keep in the paper but which also break the coherence of the paragraph. Then revise, using relative clauses to get that material into less prominent positions.
>
> Although America's two major political parties both try to support the principles of the Constitution, their viewpoints on how to accomplish this goal are very different. The Democratic Party aims to improve the general well-being of each individual by establishing governmental agencies and programs. This party's leader until recently was Senator Gary Hart of Colorado. The Republican Party aims to improve the well-being of individuals by encouraging business growth. This party's leader is President Reagan.

In exercises such as 6., students get a feel for how real text works when they discover that they can revise sentences three and five into nonrestrictive relatives (or appositives) contained in the sentences that precede them.

Conclusion

Ten years ago, Shaughnessy referred to basic writers as "strangers in academia, unacquainted with the rules and rituals of college life, unprepared for the sorts of tasks their teachers were about to assign them" (Errors 3). It is on this sociolinguistic level that a writing-for-academic-purposes course would operate in order to address basic writers' problems. The classroom would become a proving ground for academic writing tasks rather than an unreal shelter, as is so often the case, where students do grammar exercises isolated from context and then write occasional paragraphs on artificial topics. Instead, students would produce the kind of discourse that they already may be writing in other courses--the kind that may make or break them in college. For most writing teachers, the greatest challenge in designing LSP-influenced courses is to learn more about the academic discourse universe. Indeed, much is yet to be learned about it, but understanding the discourse that students struggle with is an essential part of the basic writing teacher's job.

Notes

[1]This movement is also referred to in other way. In the British and American educational systems, the terms most often used are "English for Specific Purposes" and "English for Special Purposes," both of which share the acronym "ESP."

[2]LSP derives from sociolinguistic principles, many going back to work by Malinowski and Firth. To these two men, understanding any language act meant understanding the surrounding "context of situation"; later sociolinguists have refined the concept and shown that contexts of situation consist of factors such as audience, purposes, subject, setting, medium, channel, and genre. Contexts of situation repeat themselves and eventually become conventionalized; thereafter, norms for acceptability are shared by language users, members of "speech communities." Naturally, new language learners must confront the contextual nature of language too. As Halliday (43) maintains, children do not learn an all-purpose language, but rather they learn the language of situations. Then, as they mature, language learners add to their storehouse of mastered contexts of situation. For detailed discussions of the relationship between sociolinguistic theory and written language, see Popken ("Sociolinguistic Principles . . . ") and Faigley.

[3]There is plenty of evidence justifying the claim that there is no singular "good writing." What is good writing in one context may be vastly different from that in another, as research suggests (e.g., see Frawley and Smith; and Mellon).

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